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For Julie Jones

A meticulous and probing reader who significantly
broadened the *Journal*'s scope

For Bruce Campbell

An exceptional designer
who lavished his talents on this publication

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Manuscript Guidelines for the *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

The *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is issued annually by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its purpose is to publish original research on works in the Museum's collection. Articles are contributed by members of the Museum staff and other art historians and specialists. Submissions should be emailed to: journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org.

Manuscripts are reviewed by the *Journal* Editorial Board, composed of members of the curatorial, conservation, and scientific departments. **To be considered for the following year's volume, an article must be submitted, complete including illustrations, by October 15.** Once an article is accepted for publication, the author will have the opportunity to review it after it has been edited and again after it has been laid out in pages. The honorarium for image costs is $300, and each author receives a copy of the *Journal* volume in which his or her article appears.

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For the style of captions and bibliographic references in endnotes, authors are referred to *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide to Editorial Style and Procedures*, which is available from the Museum's Editorial Department upon request, and to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Please provide a list of all bibliographic citations that includes, for each title: full name(s) of author or authors; title and subtitle of book or article and periodical; place and date of publication; volume number, if any; and page, plate, and/or figure number(s). For citations in notes, please use only the last name(s) of the author or authors and the date of publication (e.g., Jones 1953, p. 65; Smith and Harding 2006, pp. 7–10, fig. 23).

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ABBREVIATIONS

MMA	The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB	*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*
MMJ	*Metropolitan Museum Journal*

Height precedes width and depth in dimensions cited.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
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A Buddhist Source for a Stoneware "Basket" Designed by Georges Hoentschel

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Among the ceramics produced under the direction of the famed French designer Georges Hoentschel (1855–1915),[1] an unusual piece (Figure 1), sometimes classified as a "basket," raises intriguing questions regarding the range of sources that inspired French and other European ceramists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Made of stoneware, this extraordinary vessel was hand-built in the studio established by Jean-Joseph Carriès (1855–1894) in Burgundy in 1888. After Carriès's death, Hoentschel worked there with Carriès's affiliates to produce ceramics that followed the style of certain types of Japanese stoneware then being exhibited and extolled in Europe. The decision to make the basket of stoneware rather than porcelain reflects the contemporaneous Western perception that stoneware (and the anonymous artists who crafted it) embodied an aesthetic that was more immediate, intimate, and expressive than the perfected and highly decorated products of large porcelain manufactories. The matted glaze also reflects an appreciation for Japanese traditions.

This uncommon vessel sits on a base whose bulbous shape is accentuated by four thick vertical bands appliquéd along the sides. Four curved prongs, joined together at the top of the basket, spring from the base. These prongs were shaved to create the appearance of metal and are connected to one another on the interior by strips of clay. Additional clay plaques decorated with stylized vegetal patterns fill the interstices between the prongs where they emerge from the base, and clay was also used to define a cylindrical opening (Figure 2) in the center of the vessel, which helps to explain its designation as a "basket."

While the embellishment of a surface with additional elements is characteristic of Art Nouveau (1890–1910) ceramics, the shape of the basket suggests an unexpected prototype, a Buddhist ritual implement (Figure 3) known in Sanskrit as a *vajra*.[2] The overall shape of the Hoentschel-designed basket is remarkably similar to that of one half of a *vajra*. Although the number of prongs can differ, they invariably converge at their tips, as do those found on the ceramic designed by Hoentschel. Moreover, the articulation and decoration of the lower half of the Hoentschel piece show parallels to the shaping and decoration of the bead-like forms at the center of a *vajra*.

Symbolic of both the power of a thunderbolt and the adamantine qualities of a diamond, the *vajra* signifies indestructibility in the pursuit of enlightenment. Although they have a long history in Indian culture, such objects first became prominent in Buddhist rites between the seventh and ninth centuries, owing to the development of new practices during that time.[3] By the twelfth century, these expanded traditions had spread, and ritual implements, particularly the *vajra* and the bell, were produced in large numbers throughout Asia. Ironically, at about the same time, Buddhism essentially disappeared from India.[4] While *vajra*s are seen in the hands of deities represented in Indian Buddhist art, no examples of Indian *vajra*s have been preserved. By the late nineteenth century, when Hoentschel designed his basket, the type of Buddhism that involved the use of *vajra*s was practiced principally in Tibet, Mongolia, and China, and to a lesser extent in Japan.[5]

Ritual implements were neither trade goods nor objects that were exhibited at world's fairs or other international displays. One wonders, therefore, where and how Hoentschel, one of his collaborators, or, possibly, a patron would have seen or acquired a *vajra*. Representations, sometimes fanciful, of these implements appear in Chinese decorative arts such as porcelain or cloisonné (Figure 4), and it is possible that such a motif might have spread to Europe through trade in such luxuries. However, the three-dimensional understanding of the object's shape seen in the basket produced under Hoentschel's supervision suggests that an

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1. Georges Hoentschel (French, 1855–1915), designer. "Basket," ca. 1900. Glazed stoneware, H. 19½ in. (49.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection, Purchase, Acquisitions Fund; Louis V. Bell, Harris Brisbane Dick, Fletcher, and Rogers Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest; and 2011 Benefit Fund, 2013 (2013.491). Photographs of Figures 1, 2: Joseph Coscia Jr., The Photograph Studio, MMA

2. View of Figure 1 from above

3. Ritual implement *vajra*. China, Tang dynasty (618–907), 9th–10th century. Gilt bronze, L. 8⅜ in. (21.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Charlotte C. and John C. Weber Collection, Gift of Charlotte C. and John C. Weber, 1994 (1994.605.43) . Photograph: Oi-Cheong Lee, The Photograph Studio, MMA

actual *vajra* rather than a two-dimensional image served as the prototype.

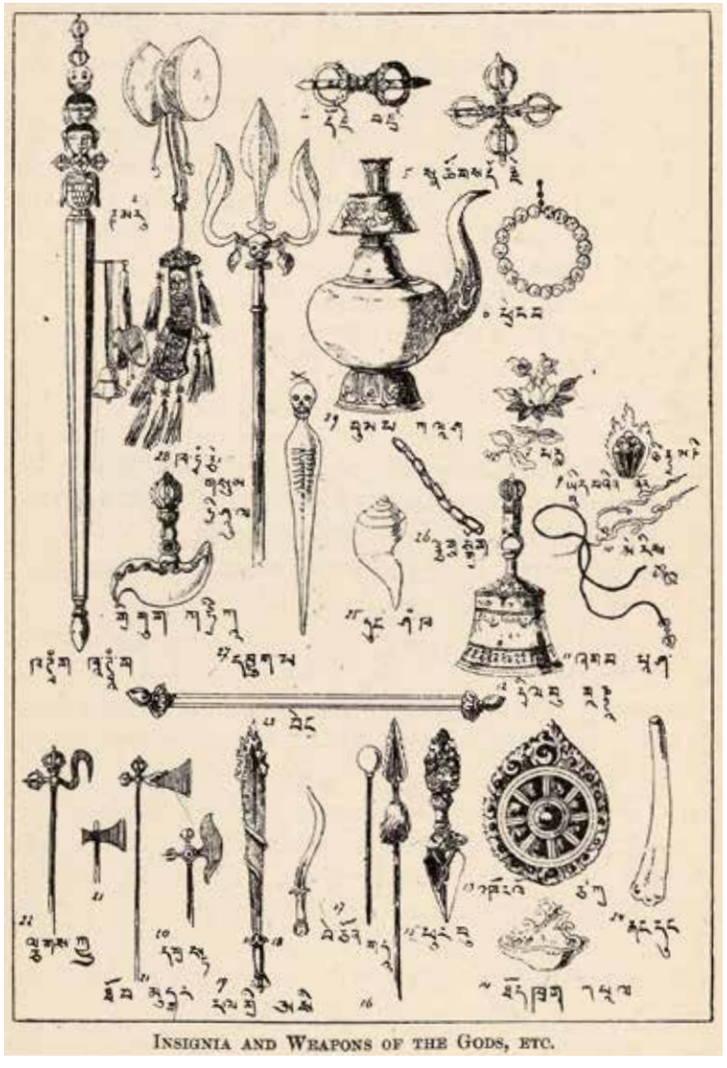
Hoentschel and his patrons were part of a multinational, peripatetic circle, and such an implement could have been acquired, possibly as a souvenir, during travel in Asia. Hoentschel, a collector of Japanese art, worked on the interior design of the Akasaka Palace, built for the Crown Prince in Tokyo between 1899 and 1909, a time when Buddhist art was often available for purchase. Between 1872 and 1874, the Meiji government (1868–1912) actively discouraged the practice of Buddhism by enforcing a policy known as *haibutsu kishaku*, which led to the defrocking of monks and the destruction and/or closing of nearly 40,000 temples. The subsequent dispersal of icons and other temple goods is reflected in the late nineteenth-century burgeoning of Japanese Buddhist art collections in the West.[6]

It is also possible that Hoentschel's introduction to the *vajra* can be linked to the study of Buddhism and, in particular, to the Western fascination with Tibetan Buddhism (also known as Lamaism[7]) in the second half of the nineteenth century. As a primary source for practices no longer preserved in India, Tibet was important to both Western and Asian scholars.[8] Western studies of Tibetan Buddhist belief practices and imagery were published in 1863 and 1895.[9] The latter, a significant early analysis of this particular Buddhist practice, includes a chart of ritual implements showing both a two-pronged and a four-pronged *vajra* (Figure 5). While there is no known documentation attesting to the presence of a *vajra* in late nineteenth-century France, the 1883 guidebook to the collection of the Musée Guimet, the Asian art branch of the Louvre in Paris, describes Tibetan Buddhist sculptures then on view as figures holding such implements.[10]

Given Hoentschel's prominence in cultural and artistic circles and his ties to Asia, it seems reasonable to suggest that he had not only seen a *vajra* but also knew what it meant and how it was used. Moreover, the choice of this rather obscure implement as a prototype for a ceramic piece fits within the parameters of the cultural concerns of the day, particularly in France, where an emphasis on the fin de siecle as a period of both decline and renewal was reflected in the development of a range of philosophical and artistic schools. Chief among them, the late nineteenth-century Symbolist movement in painting, spurred by an earlier flowering in literature, focused on the use of art to reveal the spiritual and the unseen. Symbolism was closely aligned with Art Nouveau,[11] noted for its eclectic use of earlier and imported imagery:[12] the *vajra*, an unusual shape with esoteric associations, would have appealed to artists working in these idioms.

The concerns about stagnation, corruption, social change, and industrialization that inspired artistic movements such

4. Box with design of crossed *vajras*. China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), late 16th century. Cloisonné, Diam. 8½ in. (21.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Edward G. Kennedy, 1929 (29.110.90a, b)



5. Illustrations showing *vajra*s and other ritual implements. From Waddell 1895, p. 341

as Symbolism and Art Nouveau also spurred the rise of myriad spiritual/occult movements throughout Europe and in the United States in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. It may be worth noting that one such movement, Theosophy, which was established by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) and others in London and New York, began about 1879 to focus on Tibet as the source of true or pure knowledge that was purportedly preserved by great souls known as mahatmas and accessible only to initiates.

Although it cannot be proved, it is tempting to speculate that the peculiar "basket" designed by Hoentschel was produced for, or commissioned by, a client interested either in emerging artistic currents such as Symbolism and Art Nouveau, or in obscure spiritual practices.[13] The work might also have been made for an individual engaged in both of these late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century phenomena.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. For a recent study of the artist, see Kisluk-Grosheide et al. 2013.
2. The *vajra* is known as a *jingang* in Chinese, a *kongoshō* in Japanese, and a *dorje* in Tibetan.
3. Davidson 2003.
4. Buddhism endured in isolated pockets of India's southern and northeastern regions.
5. The types of Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia do not include the use of the *vajra*.
6. One of the best-known examples of this phenomenon is found in the work of the American scholar Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908), who played a seminal role in fostering the study of Japanese Buddhist art. Fenollosa's collection was eventually acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where from 1890 to 1896 he served as the first curator of a newly established department of Asiatic Art. See Chisolm 1963.
7. As mentioned earlier, this type of Buddhism, in particular the Gelugpa tradition, was also practiced in Mongolia and China. For reasons of simplicity, Tibetan Buddhism is cited here.
8. Tibet and its religious traditions were simultaneously revered and reviled in Western scholarship and popular culture. See Lopez 1998.
9. Schlagintweit 1863 and Waddell 1895.
10. De Milloué 1883, pp. 69, 71, 74.
11. See Greenhalgh 2000.
12. Japanese woodblock prints, valued for their bold, two-dimensional compositions and strong colors, were among the most influential works of art imported into France at the time and played a significant role in the development of *japonisme*. It is interesting to note that such prints (which never include images of a *vajra*) often illustrated the life of the "floating world," or entertainment districts of Tokyo and Kyoto, areas that were probably similar in outlook and interest to those of the demimonde sometimes featured in Art Nouveau.
13. There may have been a group of potential buyers rather than a single individual who served as prospective patrons for the creation of such an unusual vessel.

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